
Living and Dying with "Information": Comments on the Report *Buildings, Books, and Bytes*

MICHAEL GORMAN

ABSTRACT

CONSIDERS THE "BENTON REPORT" IN LIGHT OF its stated aims and pronouncements. Finds the analysis of the present situation of libraries shallow and unconvincing. Discerns a hidden agenda of imposing "virtual libraries" on a public that, according to the testimony gathered by the report itself, wants real libraries. Deplores the application of half-baked business concepts to the present state of, and future prospects for, libraries. Laments the elitism that pervades the report.

Parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus—Horace

INTRODUCTION

The worthy Benton Foundation, funded by the equally worthy Kellogg Foundation, has produced a report on the future of libraries (not explicitly restricted to public libraries but clearly to be read as such) based on interviews with "library leaders," public opinion surveys, and colloquies to consider both. The result is, alas, replete with windy generalizations, unestablished premises, and specious assertions.

To begin at the beginning (with the opening words of the Executive Summary on page 3): "This report is about librarians and the challenges they face in the digital world." Which "digital world" would that be? The report offers no definition of this curious term and not even the sketchiest description of a digital world is given. It appears to stem from the implications of the pervasive notion, advanced by academics and some

"library leaders" (many not librarians) and pushed by Big Computer Business, that the ubiquity of computers is changing society, life, and learning to a degree not seen since Herr Gutenberg. There is no evidence that this is so, despite all the pundits and prognosticators who have asserted it in thousands of books and articles (all printed on paper). As if the "digital world" were not enough, the third sentence of this report solemnly informs us that libraries face "the onset of the digital revolution, a seismic social shift." Wow!

The report is bedeviled, like most of its kin on the future of libraries, by the use of the word "information" to mean everything and nothing. In normal usage, "information" is taken to mean facts, data, small stand-alone texts, and images. There is another definition of "information," of course. In that definition, apparently embraced by this report, "information" is used to mean all human communication (a Rembrandt is "visual information," *Citizen Kane* "cinematic information," and *Moby Dick* "textual and nautical information"). The problem is that, in meaning everything, "information" means nothing. Information, as normally understood, is not even the primary good with which libraries deal or have ever dealt. Who goes to a library to find out about the weather, highway traffic reports, TV/radio schedules, or a supermarket sale? Library users do come to the library for information but, far more often, they come for what makes libraries special—literature, entertainment, learning, and recorded knowledge in all its forms. The reason why technophiles stress information is very simple: computers are very good at storing and transmitting information and no good at all when it comes to preserving and making available leisure reading, literature, and recorded knowledge in all its forms.

What are we to make of the use in this report of the term "paper information resources" (p. 4)? It clearly is intended to include, say, *War and Peace*, *The Origin of Species*, *The Double Helix*, *The Guns of August*, and, come to that, *Library Trends*. Do the authors really think that these, and a myriad other, publications are about information or is this a calculated reductionism to disguise the central flaw in their central notion that we live in an "information age"? If we librarians and library users can be persuaded that libraries are about information and nothing more, then we can be persuaded that real libraries, librarians, and library collections have no future, and we should resign ourselves to the oxymoronic "virtual library" and all the rest of the real agenda of reports such as this. The facts say otherwise. One odd contradiction in the report is a low-level anxiety about the "competition" for libraries from mega-bookstores (Barnes & Noble and such). This anxiety, however misplaced, betrays the fact that ordinary people know the difference between the kind of stuff (data, images, and other information) that they can find using a computer and, on the other hand, literature, leisure reading, and cu-

mulative recorded knowledge—all of which are, and will remain, best provided by the sustained reading of books. Librarians with any sense of their history and environment know that libraries and bookstores complement each other and, far from being in competition, often increase each other's use. Also, who would not prefer a Barnes & Noble to a "virtual library"? Fortunately, that is not a choice we will have to make.

Given the inability of this report to define the "digital world" that it says, in some parts, is imminent and, in other sections, is already here, and its inability to recognize that information (as commonly used) is not the touchstone of the destiny of libraries, what remains is a collection of bits and pieces of varying interest and importance. For instance, absent these definitions, how should we construe: "Libraries are thus at a cross-roads [sic], for they must adjust their traditional values and services to the digital age" (p. 7). My understanding of our traditional values is that they comprise, most importantly: service, intellectual freedom, a commitment to literacy, learning, democracy, and the preservation of the records of humankind. Even if one grants we are in a "digital age," which of these values needs to be "adjusted"? I do hope that we are not being told we must abandon our unique historic role as the preservers of the records of humankind just because electronic records are notoriously transient, mutable, fragile, and expensive to maintain. Perhaps we are to "adjust" our commitment to literacy because the "digital age" is also a post-literate age?

How about: "with the onset of the digital age...libraries must expand beyond the confines of the traditional library building" (p. 7)? One of the problems of reports by people entranced by technology is that they are shockingly ahistorical. Libraries have *always* reached out beyond their walls: interlibrary loan, service to shut-ins of all kinds (the sick, prisoners, etc.), telephone and mail (including e-mail) reference services, shared cataloging, mobile libraries and the rest may lack the glitz of electronics, but they are long-established aspects of library services. Given that history and commitment, do libraries really need a report to tell them that they can use electronic communication to reach out (something they are all doing already)? This beyond-the-library-walls theme hits a note of hysterical inanity with: "Your computer is a library, say those who carry this concept the [sic] furthest. It is outside library walls but it can carry you deep into library and other information collections" (p. 10). Your computer is *not* a library; most recorded knowledge and information is *not* available electronically. The information that is available using your computer is, to a great extent, disorganized, random, and lacking in secure provenance and authenticity. In short, your computer is about as far from being a library as it could be and it certainly cannot take you "deep into" a library.

THE THOUGHTS OF "LIBRARY LEADERS"

As are most librarians, I am especially interested in ideas about the future of my profession and turned to the section on "The evolving librarian" (p. 11) with interest, particularly as it seemed to promise a Darwinian perspective. We are told that some library leaders (here and elsewhere, mercifully anonymous) believe that we are destined to become "knowledge navigators" (interestingly, the term ditches "information") instead of "caretakers of material." I know of no self-respecting librarian who is, or ever sees him- or herself to be, a caretaker of materials. It is an old rhetorical dodge to set up a negative strawperson to be demolished in advancing your own idea, but this is really a bit much. Of course we should take care of our collections but this is only part of the role of the librarian as understood for more than 100 years. The lack of historical understanding or the blindness to history induced by technological zeal is patently obvious to those familiar with the writings on the complexity of the librarian's role by, among many others, Dewey, Ranganathan, and Shera. The role of the "knowledge navigator," as envisaged by these library leaders, is, "to aid users to tap more effectively the resources of the Internet and other digitized collections...[and to] become coaches rather than information authorities" (p. 11).

I have read the last five words five times and still have no idea what they mean. Dewey wrote about the role of the librarian as teacher in the early years of this century and, if that is what is meant, the report is again telling us to be what we have been all along. Perhaps the analogy is to sports, in which case it eludes me, but then I have never considered myself an "information authority" either. Also, why is the "knowledge navigator" only going to concern her- or himself with the Internet and digitized resources? Are the "traditional collections," which the report tells us *seriatim* we are to be allowed to keep, to be the province of unrecyclable and unevolved librarians or, as I would guess, do the library leaders in their secret hearts think that there will be no "traditional collections" at all and we will all be navigating the electronic wilderness and that alone?

The report talks of the "library as definer of American culture" (p. 11) and asserts the value of open access to all. I think this is fine as far as it goes but also think it should be expanded. Libraries do aid in the furtherance of the American values of democracy, education, etc., but the culture of all civilizations should be our province, especially in this time of global awareness and diversity. The section also cites one way in which the "digital library" can enhance our mission by making historical American documents widely available. This is true and laudable but hardly dependent on the existence of a "digital library." All that is needed is electronic resources (online, CD-ROM, etc.) being made available in real libraries—as they are in many libraries this very day.

We are told that, as part of our evolution, we, "need to be retrained

[and]...will need new tools to search for information from digital sources. Some caution that, in the process of becoming digitally fluent, librarians must not lose their humanistic origins" (p. 12). Leaving aside the prose (what the Dickens is "digital fluency"?), we are told that we must do what we have been happily doing for about a decade—incorporating electronic resources into our services and learning their ins and outs. Have none of these library leaders been to an ALA conference recently? Instructing us, *de haut en bas*, to do what we are doing already verges on the insulting, whereas the idea that electronic resources and humanistic values are inimical verges on the weird. What is less humanistic about the *Encyclopedia Britannica* online than the printed version? It is a lot harder to read but that is a practical, not a moral, matter.

One of the ideas that comes up often in these discussions is the notion of the library as a publisher. "Some library leaders assert that libraries in the digital age will create, publish, and manipulate information. This vision transforms libraries from collectors and disseminators to actual information creators" (p. 9). I suppose this to be an offshoot of the notion that the "digital age" will make everyone a publisher and free us all from the bothersome concepts of standards, security of provenance, filtering, and all the other aspects of the print publishing industry. If everyone is to be a publisher, why not libraries? The fact is that no one has proposed or even sketched an economic model for electronic publishing. Almost all electronic documents that aspire to be more than aggregations of information are by-products of the very successful, profitable, and innovative publishing industry. From newspapers to scholarly journals to magazines to "electronic books," we see an industry that is using the fact that its processes are already computerized to produce electronic versions of their real product—print publications. True electronic publications—CD-ROMs, online databases, etc.—are enhancements to the world of communication and only replace print publications when they deal solely in information—indexes, bibliographies, ready-reference works, etc. The libraries-as-publishers scenario greatly underestimates the intellectual and other labor that goes into print publishing—soliciting manuscripts, working with authors, editing, copy editing, marketing, etc.—and concentrates on printing and distribution, which is erroneously assumed to be "free" in the "digital world." This last is but one of the economic truths that are elided or ignored in such discussions. Electronic distribution is not "free" and, even if it were, accounts for only about 10 percent of the cost of producing a book. Are these publishing libraries going to assume responsibility for the editorial and other duties of publishers or are they just disseminators of anything they happen to find? If the former, how are they going to afford it; if the latter, why are they needed anyway?

The library leaders agree that: "Libraries in the digital age must find

their competitive niche." One library leader is quoted as saying that: "We don't have the franchise anymore to be sole providers of information in our communities and we need to stop acting as if we did" (p. 13). I cannot imagine how anyone familiar with libraries can hold the opinion that libraries once had a monopoly on the provision of information or anything else. Libraries have always co-existed happily with other agencies with missions that overlapped with ours. In this section of the report, the idea that we are in competition with, and have something to fear from, mega-bookstores rears its head again. I find this recurrent theme of competition and fear quite baffling and can only ascribe it to a combination of the angst that seems to afflict those who believe in all this "digital world" blather and the importation of business ethics and jargon into library administration. The report actually touches on this last: "One librarian suggested that libraries cannot continue to be a gateway for everyone—that they must evaluate their roles and function like a business, sizing up the competition and carving out niches" (p. 13).

All this red-in-tooth-and-claw speculation seems to me to be quite misplaced. We have never attempted to be the "gateway for everyone." We have, or should have, a fairly established view of our role and function and need not descend into the profit and loss speculations of businesses, and we have everything to gain from cooperation and co-existence with bookstores, publishers, computer services, and all the other hobgoblins that haunt these library leaders. Libraries are about community, learning, recreation, literacy, and social advancement, and we should work with (not in competition with) anybody or any agency that enables us to advance those goals.

Throughout the report, the importance of the library as physical place is stressed or, more accurately, has lip service paid to it. The subtext of the report tends in a quite different direction, nowhere more so than in the last part of the library leaders section (pp. 14-15). The American public is strongly in favor of public libraries and expresses that support financially and in other ways. As the report states: "The library is a symbol of trust and a locus of community culture, values, and identity that even non-users care about" (p. 14).

One would have thought this an unmitigated blessing, but some of our library leaders think this image of the library, "makes it difficult politically for libraries to remake their image and surge forward in the digital age" (pp. 14-15). The implication is that, fueled by fear and a desire to be with-it, library leaders are telling us that we have to take the trust of decades and the faith and confidence of our users and sacrifice them on the altar of the digital age. It does no service to anyone to recommend this course of professional suicide, and I hope the readers of this report will think long and hard before accepting this dangerous and anti-social nostrum.

THE THOUGHTS OF THE PUBLIC

The other lengthy section of the report deals with the results of an extensive and expensive public opinion survey and how the views of the public mesh or not with those of the library leaders. Most social science surveys are machines for enumerating the blindingly obvious. This is no exception. Much is made, here and elsewhere in the report, of the fact that the lowest support for libraries is among the 18-24 age group. I suppose the idea is that this is a generation that will never favor or use libraries. Of course, that is not the case, and I dare say that one would have come up with exactly the same finding thirty-five years ago when the middle-aged, who now support and use libraries heavily, were 18-24 and did not think much of libraries at all. The tendency for library use to be high in childhood, to drop off in adolescence and young adulthood, and to rise thereafter has been an observable phenomenon for all the forty years that I have been in libraries. It does, after all, arise from perfectly understandable human and societal factors.

The survey also finds: "There is a high correlation between those who are frequent library users, frequent bookstore patrons, and those who have access to a personal computer" (p. 17). I suppose it is a good thing, but did we really need a survey to tell us that the library leaders' fear of "competition" (p. 17) is nonsense?

Another finding that establishes the obvious is that nonusers are less in favor of library financing than library users. I imagine those without children are less in favor of school funding than those with, and those who do not take mass transit less in favor of funding it than those who do. Fortunately, the majority of Americans do use public libraries, and there still remain some vestiges of the notion of the public good, so this unsurprising finding need not be the calamity the report thinks it to be.

One strong opinion that surfaces is that libraries are important to children and families with children. The survey finds that the public rates children's services first in its priorities for libraries (followed by the provision of books and library buildings). Is the conclusion not inescapable? Public libraries should continue to emphasize its services to children (books, story hours, other media—including affordable appropriate electronic media), the provision of books and other "traditional media" for the general public, maintenance of the library building as a community asset, and enhancement of those services by the provision of access to electronic resources. Perhaps this is too mundane a solution for those who want to be "knowledge navigators" in a "digital world," but it seems to me to be the only sensible way to proceed.

KEY PUBLIC POLICIES

The report identifies four "policy themes" that are germane to the future of libraries. All four revolve around questions of electronic access

and, though largely unexceptionable in themselves, thereby reinforce the idea that the true agenda is to replace real libraries with virtual libraries. First Amendment rights are considered only in the "networked environment" and thus the report ignores all the First Amendment issues that come up daily in real libraries. Universal service and access, in their view, involves "as a matter of public policy, affordable access to, and use of, networking tools." What about the need for guaranteed access to a decent collection of books and journals? Intellectual property issues are discussed only in the electronic context—a milieu in which this difficult question verges on the insoluble, something that digital library advocates, as here, tend to gloss over. Lastly, funding is considered only for "new and expanded activities" and for a future in which "the traditional link between library service areas and local property taxes is uncoupled through networked services and collections." Did it not occur to anyone connected with this enterprise that that future could be avoided by regarding electronic resources as an enhancement to, not a replacement for, real libraries?

A COORDINATED COLLABORATIVE EFFORT?

The report closes with the product of a two-day conference of library leaders, Foundation staffs, and pollsters.

What emerged was a proposal to propagate "new life forms," in which libraries team [sic] with other public service information providers to form community education and information networks open and available to all. With some communities already experimenting with collaborations and cyberspace creating myriad cyber-communities for information exchange of all kinds, libraries should create broad-based, real-time networks with public service partners that can facilitate this exchange of information. (p. 40)

My heart had been sinking all the time I was reading this document and, I thought, reached the depths when it came to "new life forms." But there was worse to come. "As this report makes clear, the public loves libraries. But the libraries they love are sometimes at odds with the library leaders' visions of libraries' future roles" (p. 41). So, that is what it all boils down to. The public is too dumb to see that the libraries they love should be replaced by new life forms that library leaders want. What a pity and a shame that we should have come to this.